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BOARD GAMES BEFORE UR?

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It has for long been accepted that one of the earliest known board games was the celebrated 'Royal Game of Ur' (Fig. 1), that is exhibited in the British Museum and is dated to around 2500 BCE (Becker 2007; Finkel 2007: 17). The game of 'twenty squares' – the type of game that is exemplified by the 'Royal Game of Ur' – is indeed one of the oldest known board games.

As Sumer is sometimes dubbed the 'cradle of civilization', it was assumed that there could be some sort of correlation between the rise of earliest states and the birth of board games. Although very simplistic, the hypothesis receives some kind of support from ancient Egypt. There too we have board games – senet (or *znt*) and mehen (*mhn*) – which appear as early as the first dynasties, and seem to accompany the rise of the Egyptian civilization. If we leave apart a miniature board from el-Mahasna, which is exhibited in the Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, in Brussels, and which is assigned to the Naqada I period (*ca* 4000-3500 BCE), because there are doubts about its actual function (Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016: 41-43), boards for playing senet (Fig. 2) – at least fragmentary – appear in the First Dynasty (*ca* 3100-2900 BCE). Mehen, another board game from ancient Egypt, offers examples that date back to the end of the fourth millennium BCE, in other words around 3000 BCE (Crist, Dunn-Vaturi, de Voogt 2016: 17).

Keeping with these very early times we can see that the Indus civilization also had board games. Although they are hard to characterize, because the few gameboards that have been unearthed are just fragments, and the field is 'invaded' with small objects often interpreted as 'gamesmen' (or 'pendants'…), and even sometimes as… chessmen, it is clear that the game of 'twenty squares' was also known there. Not only were terracotta fragments of gameboards excavated at Mohenjo-daro, but four fragmentary boards, made of stone, were unearthed at Dholavira, Gujarat, two of which being easily recognizable as parts of 'twenty squares' games (Bisht 2015: 8.9.4.1., p. 594-6) (Fig. 3 – forget the 'gamesmen'). The city of Dholavira flourished between *ca* 2500 and *ca* 2000 BCE.

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